

The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) is the Virginia state authority for public health response, and is the state's source of COVID-19 ("coronavirus") preparation, prevention, transmission, and response. Please continue to rely on VDH for updated public health information and recommendations to do our individual part in preventing the spread of infection. <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/surveillance-and-investigation/novel-coronavirus/>

In addition to being prepared from a public health standpoint, this email provides information regarding preparation for the behavioral health implications of an outbreak, which is under the authority of Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS) in our function as the state behavioral health authority, and under your authority as the local Community Services Board (the local behavioral health authority). We will continue to monitor the situation and provide additional information regarding behavioral health implications or actions recommended to take as the local behavioral health authority.

Attached you will find a resource from the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress regarding behavioral health guidelines for response to a pandemic flu outbreak as a behavioral health authority. Links to two national website resources, which mirror resources for most community stressors or traumatic events, can be found below under Communication. Some of the major points for current consideration are summarized below. Please do not hesitate to reach out if you have questions or concerns regarding managing the behavioral health impact of COVID-19.

#### **Early Considerations:**

- **Expectations.** There is little research on the psychological impact of a public health outbreak, but research on the SARS epidemic indicated that responses may be similar to natural disasters, including increased stress, fear, and feelings of helplessness, and that front-line health workers are particularly vulnerable to the mental health impacts of such events.
- **Communication.** Wide dissemination of uncomplicated, empathically informed information on normal stress reactions can serve to normalize reactions and emphasize hope, resilience, and natural recovery. Messages should be tailored to developmental status, for example:  
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/coping.html>  
<https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/disasters/pandemic-resources>
- **Tipping points.** Certain events, known as 'tipping points', will occur that can dramatically increase or decrease fear and helpful or health risk behaviors. Tipping points may occur around the state at different times due to location of confirmed cases, thus, should be monitored locally. We will be monitoring for any statewide tipping point.
- **Surges in demands for health care.** Those who believe they have exposed (but have not actually been) may outnumber those exposed and may quickly overwhelm a community's medical response capacity. This will be seen in emergency services settings and crisis call lines may be impacted. Psychological and behavioral responses as well as workforce protection and workforce shortages are important preparedness considerations.

#### **Mental Health Intervention Considerations:**

- Engage in efforts to support vulnerable individuals under stress to take care of their own health and limit potentially harmful behaviors.
- Use risk communication principles and promote clear safety communication; be mindful of these principles when interacting with the media or the general public.
- Provide care and mobilize community resources to support first responders.
- Monitor/provide surveillance of mental health impact including PTSD, depression and altered substance use as well as psychosocial needs (e.g., housing, transportation, schools, employment) and loss of critical infrastructure necessary to sustaining your community function
- Utilize evidence-informed principles of psychological first aid and utilize mental health first aid-trained workers in your system. Principles include:
  - Establish safety; identify safe areas and behaviors
  - Maximize individuals' ability to care for self and family and provide measures that allow individuals and families to be successful in their efforts
  - Teach calming skills and maintenance of natural body rhythms (e.g., nutrition, sleep, rest, exercise)
  - Maximize and facilitate connectedness to family and other social supports to the extent possible (this may require electronic rather than physical presence)
  - Foster hope and optimism while not denying risk.